

**W**e divided ourselves into two teams. Young-bum, Chulho, Min-gook, and Un-sik would cover the market, meaning they would steal food for us to eat or sell and also steal won. Sangchul, Myeongchul, and I would perform at the train station. Chulho actually volunteered for his group, announcing with a wicked smile that he had no moral issues about thievery and wasn't particularly fond of the arts. "I prefer the art of perfecting me," he said, puffing up his chest.

I walked right up close and stared him down. "There are two rules: We don't steal from children, and we don't steal from old people. Got it?"

Chulho opened his mouth to protest and then caught Young-bum's cold, icy stare. I guess Young-bum wasn't quite as hardened as I had thought.

“Okay, okay,” Chulho said, putting his hands up in the air. “You win.”

Our plan was to meet back at Young-bum’s house, making it our base of operation. I wanted to make sure we lived in the house as much as possible so brokers didn’t get it. The others were happy to not have to sleep outside anymore. The other part of our deal was that we shared everything. We pooled our goods and won together at the end of each day.

LIFE UNFOLDED. OR, RATHER, WE EXISTED FOR ALL OF THE fall and part of the winter. I guess we drifted like the snowbanks. We’d arrive back at the house at different times of the day and empty our bags and pockets into a yellow plastic washing bowl that Chulho had stolen from a woman with a baby. He shrugged when I started to lay into him about how we weren’t going to steal from children or old people. “She wasn’t old,” he said. Chulho liked to push boundaries—I had to give him that much.

At first, when we needed to cook, we took turns. After about a week, Unsik took over. He had a knack for adding a pinch of salt in the right place, or a dried green radish somewhere else, to spruce up any dish, including corn rice. As he cooked, he hummed the revolutionary song “Red Flag.”

There are a few things about boys being left on their own that I came to discover during those months. One: With no adult around to lecture us, we could pretty much get away with any-

thing. Chulho and, well, all of us, started to chain-smoke. Chulho also got us talking about things we'd like to do with older women. I'd never heard such talk before, so I blushed in the beginning and turned away. But as the alcohol Chulho said we had to have every day to make it through the winter made its way through my veins, I loosened up and listened.

*Sool* was hard to steal because the merchants hid it in boxes, so we used either the won we earned performing or the won that Young-bum and the market crew stole to buy alcohol. We stole most of our food, from twisted bread sticks to *dububab* to candy. These foods became pretty much our steady diet during the coldest months so that Unsik didn't have to lug water from the river every night to cook.

Chulho was always the last to fall asleep and the hardest to wake in the mornings. We'd be ready to go, and he'd still be snoring, drooling on his mat, and mumbling women's names.

Young-bum, however, had nightmares, screaming into the night, often calling out for his grandmother. One time, he even thought she was standing in the room, watching over us, holding a white magnolia, welcoming him to the spirit world. "I'm going to die! I'm going to die!" he woke up yelling.

I settled him down, eventually convincing him that what he'd had was a *fear* dream. You know, the kind you have in which your worst fears seem like omens of what's to come. But these were just his mind playing tricks on him, I told him. "I have fear dreams

several times a day in which I am sure my parents are dead, their executions watched over by some school class in another city. Then I wake up from my daydream or night dream and tell myself: *fear dream*. You had a night fear dream . . . but same thing. Not real. These are in your mind. Now, dreams that are premonitions of things to come, these are from somewhere else . . . not your mind . . . like a voice in your head telling you not to go down a certain alleyway."

I think Young-bum got it. But he still had nightmares.

When Myeongchul got drunk, he became even chattier, quoting Korean proverbs and acting out different characters, keeping us all in stitches.

Min-gook, who was a quiet guy to begin with, became even more so. Occasionally, though, he'd recite sayings from Kim Il-sung. One night, I hit him on the back of the head with the palm of my hand to get him to stop. "I'm just not sure it's relevant now to keep saying stuff like 'I vow to adopt the communist look, revolutionary work methods, and people-oriented work style.'"

I think he got what I was saying, because he stopped.

Sangchul played games, like the food-fantasy game my father had taught me, even with just himself. "I am thinking of candy, sugar-melting-in-my-mouth candy, shaped like flowers . . . from a wedding . . .," he would say. I told him that I did that, too, and that my favorite was a yellow tulip candy.

Unsik became like our housemother. Young-bum called him



a *jultagi*, a street boy who stole clothes, mostly from people's clotheslines. He made sure we were always dressed warmly. He also swept and kept things as clean as he could. Before the deep-freeze days of winter came, he'd awake early in the morning and trudge his way through the snowbanks to the river, where he collected water in that plastic yellow laundry bowl he'd use to wash whatever dishes needed cleaning.

But no matter how well Unsik looked after the place, one thing about boys living together in a confined space with no adults hovering at them to bathe is that they also stink. And stinky boys don't smell it on themselves or on one another.

Mi Shun came to tell us she was leaving Shang-gi-ryeong in search of a distant relative in another town who she hoped had food. She stepped into the house, plugged her nose, and then immediately left. Shivering outside, she told Young-bum that we didn't need to worry about brokers stealing her mother's place. It reeked of onions, cigarette smoke, stale alcohol, and our foul body odor. She said she'd never visit again unless we found a way to wash our bodies and the house. But even Chulho, who one night when drunk admitted he had a crush on Young-bum's aunt, wasn't that inspired to change. For one, there was no hot water. We'd have to buy extra wood to heat enough water for all of us to have a bath. Chulho would rather stay dirty than spend his extra cash on wood instead of *sool*.



ALTHOUGH WE NEVER SAID SO FORMALLY, IT WAS UNDERSTOOD that we were no longer celebrating holidays, like the Day of the Sun or our birthdays. I thought it was just plain economical to forget, not having to buy any eggs or pork or to skip a day making money to party. But the truth was that I wanted to forget what my life had been like before I'd become a *kotjebi*.

So it was just a few weeks after the winter solstice, when those short days were dark to begin with, when Young-bum and I figured we actually were bringing home less than was usual, even taking into consideration that most of the merchants who lived outside Gyeong-seong, like the fish sellers, were no longer coming to the market and there was little produce left to sell.

"We should still have more," I said.

"I think someone is stealing," Young-bum said out loud what I was thinking. "I think it's Chulho," he added. "He disappears every day without telling me where he's going."

I said nothing. But I was playing Chulho's own words over and over again in my head: *Every gang needs a wild card*. My gut said it was him, too.

"Why don't you skip performing for a few days and spy on him?" Young-bum suggested.

I nodded. I had to catch a thief.

WHEN I AWOKE AT DAWN, I DIDN'T GET UP. I MOANED AND pulled my dirty wool blanket over my face. When I heard the foot-

steps and the voices of the others fade down the road, I slipped out from underneath my covers and ran through the fields until I reached the market.

As soon as I entered, I grabbed a wide-rimmed hat off an old beggar man, promising to give it back. I then trailed Chulho, biting my lip to stop myself from laughing as I watched him flirt with the female vendors. What the women couldn't see, but I could, was a hungover Chulho, standing on wobbly legs, sneaking a hand onto a table and grabbing whatever items were on display that he could hold. As the women batted their eyelashes and stuck their hips out toward Chulho, giggling and blushing from his attention, he'd stuff the items into his bag.

Nothing so far seemed out of sorts.

Until midday.

With that Chulho swagger of his, he grabbed some fried tofu off a tray a woman was carrying and sauntered right out of the market. I followed at a distance, ducking in behind the corners of buildings whenever he looked back. He walked clear through town until he stopped in front of a house with boarded-up windows. He knocked three times and waited. The door swung open and he stepped inside.

I had to see for myself what was going on, so I sneaked up to the building and found a small hole between the boards on one of the windows.

At first, the lighting inside was so dim I saw nothing but the

shadows of moving people. Then, as my eyes adjusted, I saw tiny candles set in jars on the floor. A woman sashayed in front of me and I leaped back in shock. But she didn't notice me. I looked in the window again. The woman was about my mother's age, wearing dark gray slacks and an oversize black wool sweater that had a big tear in the back. Her arms and hands moved like birds' wings. She flitted around like a swallow. She eventually sat down in front of another woman, who began to pick lice out of her hair.

Then I heard Chulho talking to another woman, who had an older, crinkly voice, like leaves being rubbed together. I couldn't see him, and I strained to hear the conversation as if it were taking place in another room.

A woman stepped toward the front door to leave. I ducked down behind a garbage bin so she couldn't see me. As she opened the door, a gust of wind scented with some heavy perfume, a body oil maybe, moved out and hit me.

All I could think as I watched her move down the street was how different a house full of girls was from our house full of boys.

I SKULKED BACK TO THE TRAIN STATION, MY INSIDES FEELING like sour milk with a lemon squirted over the top. I was angry. I was hurt. Most of all, I was confused. Someone was stealing from us. Chulho was up to something. A knot in my stomach curled its way up, strangling my throat.

But it was not Chulho who was stealing. That night and the



nights that followed, everything I watched him steal he plopped down in that plastic yellow laundry basket. In fact, he was stealing more food for us than anyone else.

Finally, after following Chulho several times to the women's house, I told Young-bum, "He's not stealing, but he's doing something . . . Something's not right, I can feel it," I said.

"Whatever it is, he'll come clean about it one of these days. You know him," Young-bum said with a sigh. "Chulho's always talking to someone, digging up some piece of information."

Young-bum was right. I had to give it to Chulho; we knew more about what was going on in Joseon through him than through anyone else.

"We still have a thief among us," Young-bum continued.

So I ditched following Chulho and started trailing Unsik. And sure enough, he was the one. He pilfered some fresh buns from the lady who on my first day in the market had told me I was *kot-jebi*. Unsik never turned them in.

After a few days of watching him steal stuff he never brought home, I decided to confront him.

I followed him as he sidled out of the market with a handful of twisted bread, not stopping until he reached a low bridge on the far side of the train station. As some barefooted children looked on with hungry eyes, Unsik ate bread stick after bread stick. I stepped out from the shadows as he was licking his fingers clean.

"I'm sorry," he said in a quivering voice as I gripped him tight

around the throat. Urine started seeping through his pants. "I just . . . I was so hungry," he choked out.

"We have a pact!" I yelled. I punched him hard in the face. He fell to the ground, spitting up blood. He then stared up at me with desperate, frightened eyes.

I heard a familiar voice call my name and then the sound of feet running up behind me. "Stop," Chulho said.

I didn't care. All I saw in front of me was a thief.

I was on fire. A fury burned inside me, making me perspire despite the cold weather. I ripped off my shirt to cool down, and then I lunged toward Unsik to kick him.

Hands grabbed my arms and pulled me back before I could. "If we fight against each other, we weaken our link," Chulho hissed right into my ear.

I quickly spun around, raised my fist to punch Chulho, ready to kill him if I had to because he, too, was doing something wrong, and then stopped.

It wasn't Chulho at all, but Young-bum. He looked tired and worn, like the tattered bike tire some of the children now held. They were staring wide-eyed at me. One little girl in a dirty dress with sunflowers on it had a slim, open wound on her cheek, as if a knife had been swiped at her face.

My entire body trembled. "We made a pact," Young-bum continued. "We would never fight against each other, no matter what."

Young-bum let go of me and helped Unsik up.

"I know what I did was wrong," Unsik said, stepping in close, tears streaming down his face. "I won't do it ever again. Can we start over?"

I said nothing.

"Being on our own makes me think strange things sometimes . . . not be myself," Young-bum said in a quiet voice. "Did you know I even wondered . . . when we had nothing to eat for several days in a row . . . I wondered what it would be like to eat a dead person?"

Young-bum started to cry now, too.

I just stared out into nothing.

What I didn't tell him was that I had actually wondered this as well.

ON HIS WAY BACK TO THE HOUSE, CHULHO HAD BOUGHT two bottles of *sool* with won that Sangchul had earned singing. When Chulho walked in through the front door, he raised the bottles high over his head and announced we needed a pick-me-up.

As we drank, we were eerily silent, as if the thick cloud that hung over us had swallowed our voices. At one point, Chulho came clean. He told us that he was having meetings with an old woman who wanted us to sell nightflowers for her. "You know—women, to men, for sex," he said to me. Finally, I got my definition of *nightflower*: a prostitute. "It's illegal to sell and buy sex, and, well, I'm not sure how I feel about it. That's why I didn't tell

you. The old woman wants us to go to the train station and find men for the women and bring them back," Chulho explained. "But the more I talked to her, the more I came to understand that the women she was selling were just poor, hungry mothers trying to feed their kids.

"So I get it now," he continued, looking at me. "These women could be our own mothers somewhere."

"Even you have a moral compass?" Young-bum said with a grin, punching him playfully on the shoulder.

Any other night I would have laughed, thinking that Chulho actually had a human side. But not this evening.

We all fell silent again. I was angry at Unsik, at Chulho for taking so long to tell us about these meetings, and also at myself for reacting the way I did. I could have killed Unsik, that much I knew for a fact. Wind trickled in through the gaps between the window and the wall. I felt it calling me, so I decided to sleep outside.

I made my way with my blankets to a clearing near the river. I wanted to be alone. But as I sat down on a large, dry rock and wrapped the blankets around me, I heard the sound of approaching feet. I turned to see that the others had all followed me.

"Can we join you?" Young-bum asked in a timid voice.

"Why not?" I snapped. "As long as you're quiet. I want to sleep."

I lay down on my back, my hands behind my head. I strained to find the biggest and brightest star, which was low in the winter sky. When some clouds finally moved and Ursa Major came into



view, my mind drifted back to Pyongyang. My anger lifted a bit, and in its place was a burning sadness.

"When I was a little kid, I wanted to be a general in the army," I said out loud. "That dream seems now like it belonged to a different life, one that I never really lived."

After a long silence, Young-bum said, "I wanted to be a truck driver, so I could visit all the cities and get rich."

"I wanted to be a singer for our great leader, Kim Il-sung," Sangchul said.

"I wanted to be a professional marathon runner and advertise my country to the world," Min-gook said next.

"You may not believe this," Chulho began, "but I wanted to be a party leader. A big party leader. Head of the party for Gyeong-seong."

I stifled a laugh. Oddly enough, I could see Chulho as a party leader.

"My dream was to become an actor, in case you didn't know," Myeongchul said. We all jumped on him. Of course we knew. "Stop," he eventually called out. "I'm serious. I wanted to be the next Gil-nam Lee, the action hero in the movie *Order 027*. The next big Joseon action hero. I still do and will be," he said. "Failure is the mother of success, after all."

I rolled my eyes.

"Stick to radio, since you're not that handsome," Unsik chimed in. "Even I'm a better-looking guy, and that's not saying much."

The latter was kind of true. Unsik had a big nose and a round face. Myeongchul had a nose that was flat. His face was long, like a green pepper, and his eyes were small, staring out into the world like the black buttons on my father's winter coat.

"What did you want to be?" I asked Unsik.

"I don't know," he said wistfully after a long pause, his voice suddenly sad. "I liked math, I guess. But I . . . you know . . . I knew I'd finish high school, join the army, serve my mandatory time there, then go and work where the government sent me. I didn't really have any dreams. Just things like math and doing experiments in the science lab."

"I liked math, too," I said in a quiet voice. "Maybe we have more in common than we think."

"I miss my parents," he then said.

The cloud swallowed us again.

I kept staring at the brightest star, viewing it not so much on this night as a beacon, something I wanted to believe would lead me out of this dark tunnel, but instead as a place I'd rather be. As my teeth started to chatter and my body shook from the cold, I decided to go back into the house. "Anywhere but here," I whispered as I got up to leave. "I wish we had been born anywhere but here."

THAT NIGHT I DREAMED OF PYONGYANG.

*I entered the front gates of Mangyeongdae Yuheejang. I reached*

out to the sides as if I were a star and grabbed my parents' hands: eomeoni's to the right, abeoji's to the left. "High," I shouted. "Swing me high." And they did.

I heard the laughter of children on the roller coaster as it swooped down and around me.

Abeoji, with a wide smile, handed me a small paper bag of stale bread. I called out to the swans on the Daedong River. A black swan with bloodred eyes skirted closer than the white swans I wanted to feed and ate the bread, catching the pieces in the air before they even landed in the water.

Then I wasn't at the amusement park anymore. It was winter. I was panting from sledding. My cheeks were red and chapped from the biting wind; my hands and feet numb from the cold. Eomeoni tore off my mittens and wrapped my frozen fingers in hers.

"I made rice cookies," she whispered.

In my dream, I was back in my apartment in Pyongyang, which was filled with the aroma of sesame.

**W**e need to move," Young-bum said. It was midwinter 1999, nearly a year after my father had left for China. I thought we needed to leave Gyeong-seong, too, but had not brought it up with Young-bum or any of the others. If we left, Young-bum would lose his house. Brokers would take it—that was almost a certainty. I wanted the decision to leave to come from Young-bum and from him alone.

But the truth was, we were struggling.

*Kotjebi* from all over the country had flocked to Gyeong-seong, like migrating geese. But unlike migrating birds that traveled to warmer climates in the winter, including as far away as New Zealand, the *kotjebi*'s internal radar was slightly off. These hungry boys thought Gyeong-seong was the answer, not realizing we likely had even less than they had where they came from. Now we were all competing for very limited resources, and the newer the



*kotjebi*, the better they seemed to do. Mostly it was because the merchants knew who we were, all of us. When they saw any of us come into the market, they would hide their goods. It was getting harder and harder for us to steal, so we had to rely more and more on the money we made performing.

The problem with this was that Myeongchul was running out of ideas for plays he could put on. Sure, there was no shortage of stories to choose from: Kim Il-sung's childhood tests showcasing his physical and emotional strength; his love and devotion to his mother, Kang Ban-sok; and his overthrow of the Japanese colonialists. Myeongchul, however, had been at the train station for more than a year now. He had to repeat skits, and his audiences were getting bored, drifting over to watch the new *kotjebi*.

Trying to keep the spectators' interests alive, Unsik, Sangchul, and I wrote some original material. In one skit, Myeongchul plays the hero who saves the audience from villains, which were played by Unsik and me. Myeongchul was like Boy General, swooping in on his horse, a long stick, flailing his sword, also a long stick. The play started when Unsik whistled, because he could whistle louder than any train to get people's attention. And we had that. For about a week. Then the audience moved downstream to watch the newer talent.

The *kotjebi* gangs streaming into the market, some coming from as far away as Hamhung, were so desperate for food that they would fight anyone for it. Young-bum was strong. He could

look after himself when he faced foes. And Unsik and Min-gook were fast. They could escape easy enough when another *kotjebi* pulled out a chain or a broken bottle. But Chulho had a lot of puffed-up bravado inside him. He instigated a lot of fights, and he was always nursing a sliced-open side or a knife wound on his hand as a result.

"If we don't move, Chulho's going to get killed," said Young-bum, as if telling me something I didn't know. "Let's head north, spend a few weeks in a town or city before moving on to another," he suggested.

I nodded. The others agreed, too.

We'd start in Cheongjin, the provincial capital of Hamgyeongbukdo, the third-biggest city in Joseon. Our plan was to stow away on one of the coal trains just as it was leaving the Shang-gi-ryeong station.

We all helped Young-bum nail planks of wood across the doors and windows of his house, in the hopes that if we made the place look as if it were falling down, it might keep the brokers away while we were gone. I wasn't optimistic it would work, but it was worth a try.

When night fell, we ate *dububab*. Young-bum was quiet as he chugged a bottle of *sool* on his own and looked around his house for the last time.

"We'll be back," I tried to reassure him.

As I said this, I made a vow to myself that when we returned to

Gyeong-seong, I would reclaim not only Young-bum's house but also my own house and then clean it for my mother.

BOARDING THE COAL TRAIN WAS NOT AS HARD AS I'D EXPECTED. It was a new moon, for one, and a cloudy night. So it was dark, almost pitch-black. There was also no wind and, well, little noise other than my racing heartbeat and the sound of us boys breathing. For some reason, that kind of scared me, that and there being so few people milling about, including *kotjebi*. It was a night like the one when I arrived in Shang-gi-ryeong. If I hadn't been with my brothers, I might have been a bit scared of *yu-ryeong*.

We climbed up the ladder and then hid under the coal.

I only looked up when I felt the train reach its full speed. Then I sat up, spread my arms out to the side as if I were a bird, and exhaled. We were moving through the mountains, north, where the air was even fresher than in Gyeong-seong.

WE ARRIVED IN RANAM STATION ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF Cheongjin looking as black as the night, our skin, hair, and clothes covered in coal dust. Our hair was so matted with the stuff that Unsik suggested we steal a pair of scissors, cut off all our hair, and then use Young-bum's razor to shave the rest. We, indeed, looked as if we'd just been dug out of graves, but I thought of the people I'd seen at the train stations on my way to Gyeong-seong from Pyongyang: the old people and children with frizzy hair and bald

patches. I told Unsik I'd rather walk around looking like death itself than cut my hair. "I'm still alive and healthy," I told him. "So until I get sick and lose my hair without the use of any scissors, I'd like to keep what I have." I vowed then and there that if I ever got the opportunity to live in a house again where there was a bath, I would never be dirty again.

The Ranam train station was full of men, some unloading the train, others milling about drinking *sool*. I guessed that the latter were too out of it to really notice us. Or maybe they'd seen kids like us before and didn't care anymore. Either way, no one seemed to notice when we climbed down off the coal train and slunk through the station, looking for the exit.

We headed into town and in the direction, I hoped, of the coast, where, despite the cold weather, if we reached the water, I was going for a swim.

WE WALKED AND WALKED, MEETING NO ONE UNTIL SHORTLY after dawn, when we came upon two old women pushing a cart of dried mackerel. Cheongjin, the women with sea-wrinkled faces told Chulho, had four open-air markets: Ranam, Pohwang, Sunam, and Songpyeong. "Ranam Market is just around the corner," one of the women said, grabbing my arm and pulling me down the street, leaving the boys and the other woman to push the cart. When we turned the corner, my breath was knocked out of me. The market stretched out before me for as far as I could see.



There were so many people, even at this early hour, it could have been Parade Day in Pyongyang.

"Let's explore," Chulho said, catching up to me and then taking off.

I waded into the market behind him, trying not to get distracted by the colors and smells, studying which vendors sold what foods and, more important, locating the *kotjebi* gangs that my brothers and I needed to avoid.

For more than eight hours I meandered through the market, stealing candies and twisted bread. Chulho and Young-bum, using the double-razor-brick trick, got a few purses, too.

As the sun finally began to set, streaking the sky in pale pink ribbons, the boys and I met up again where we first entered the market. We needed to find somewhere to sleep that was warm. We were heading down the road, back in the direction of the train station, when we ran right into another *kotjebi* gang: boys older than us, dirtier, more confident and more sure-footed. I could tell that just by the way they stood facing us.

"Who are you?" the tallest of the boys asked, stepping toward us.

My brothers and I looked at one another and shrugged. None of us knew who should speak.

"Where are you from?" the boy demanded, clenching his fists, preparing for a fight. Some of his crew grasped wooden poles in their hands. The sight of these made me shiver.

"Gyeong-seong," I finally replied nervously, my eyes darting from one boy to the other. If we had to fight them, we had one thing going for us: There were six of them and seven of us.

The boy spat, his saliva landing on my shoe. "Leave," he said with a snarl. "There is no room for you here."

I shook my head slowly. "We can't leave," I said.

"You have two choices: Leave or fight," the boy said, walking toward me. He stopped so close I could feel his breath, hot and sticky, on my cheek.

"Fight," I said nervously. I wished Chulho had taken over talking or that Myeongchul had come up with some Korean saying that would make us all laugh and we'd become friends.

The boy scowled. "Are you sure you want to fight?" he asked. "Have you ever done this before?"

"Of course," I said. What was there to know? His gang would fight my gang.

"Well, then, you know that in street fighting, the leaders of the groups usually fight against each other. It's kind of the rule of the *kotjebi*. If we all fought and we all got injured, then, well, no one would be left. So we fight one-on-one."

I grunted, "Uh-huh," as if I already knew this. But I didn't. Back in Gyeong-seong, *kotjebi* gangs fought each other informally. These Ranam boys, though, had rules for *kotjebi* fighting that I had no clue about. My mind churned with who was going to be our leader. We had never discussed this. And while I was

confident of our fighting as a group, one-on-one was different. Individually, none of us was strong enough.

I felt as though I was going to vomit and pass out, not certain which would come first.

"So, who is your leader?" the boy asked. He had a slim mustache and narrow, beady eyes. An old scar cut his chin in half. He must have been sixteen or seventeen, I figured.

"Who is your leader?" he repeated in a raised voice. I opened my mouth to say Chulho when I heard the sound of feet shuffling behind me. I turned. My brothers had all taken a step back, leaving me to face the boy.

My mouth was dry all of a sudden.

"So you're the leader!" The boy smirked. He started pounding his fist into the palm of his hand. "Glad that's finally settled."

As I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, the boy pounced, knocking me to the ground and the wind out of me. The entire weight of his body fell hard on top of me, pinning me. Instead of getting off then, as in tae kwon do, he clung hard, so close and tight I couldn't use any of my tae kwon do skills to fight back. I couldn't even push him away to get out from under him to punch and kick. It was as if I were inside the jaws of a big whale, and he was clamping down hard, choking me around the neck with one hand and punching my face with the other.

This boy wasn't made of blood and bones but the wind of fury. This boy could kill me unless I surrendered.

Finally, the boy pulled himself off me. I rolled over onto my stomach, gasping for air, my lip swelling, my entire body bruised and bloodied and tingling from the trauma.

"You have two choices," he said, kicking me hard in the ribs one more time. "Leave, or join us and work under us."





y brothers and I trudged our way back to the train station, like mourners, carrying the embarrassment of having been defeated in battle and being forced to leave the market. None of us had any intention of remaining and working under another gang.

In a corner of the waiting room, my brothers had me lie down. Unsik got some clean water from a woman selling tofu soup. Chulho tore off the bottom of his shirt, which Young-bum ripped into several strips to use as bandages. As they looked after me, I drifted in and out of sleep. When I was awake, I'd see my brothers' eyes peering down at me, big, black, and glossy, the way fish looked when laid out on trays at the market.

Young-bum had me sit up at one point and fed me some bread. He also gave me an egg. As he did, I felt a tightening in my chest, for I remembered my mother then. When I was four, I had fallen

off the slide at the day-care center. "Adeul," she had said, handing me an egg. "Roll this over your sore arm, back and forth, like I use a rolling pin in the kitchen. The egg will take the swelling down."

I bit my lip to stop myself from crying. I really hated it when these memories hit me like this. I felt pulled under by a huge ocean wave.

I hurt all over.

I missed *eomeoni*.

AS THE PALE LIGHT OF MORNING STREAMED THROUGH THE station windows, I finally fully emerged from my dream state. Young-bum, who was lying beside me, was just opening his eyes, too.

"I know what you're going to say," he said, propping himself up by the elbow.

"What?" I said, turning my face away from him, in part because he stank, with his morning breath and bad body odor, and also I felt sick again. I didn't want to vomit on him.

"You're going to tell the others that you're stepping down as our leader. But don't," he said, turning my head so I had to look at and smell him. "From this day on, you are our leader, our *daejang*."

"But I lost the fight," I said, moaning from both the shooting pain that ricocheted through my body and the pain of my bruised ego.

"Yes, but you led our student council. You are brave and smart and courageous. We trust you."

I looked at my brothers, who were now all awake, some rubbing their eyes filled with gunk. "I'm not your leader," I whispered to them. "I'm not strong enough."

"We trust you," Sangchul and Unsik said at the same time.

"I may act brave, but I would have run away," Chulho added, lighting up a cigarette.

I scrunched up my face as he did so. "You're not even up yet and you're smoking!" I exclaimed.

He rolled his eyes.

"You brought us all together," Myeongchul continued. "You always scratch where it itches."

I wanted to make a joke about Myeongchul's proverb, but it hurt too much to laugh.

"We would all be dead right now if it wasn't for you," Mingook said instead.

I wasn't sure that was true, but I agreed to act as their leader, at least for a little while.

I STOOD UP TO STRETCH MY LEGS, WHICH ALSO HURT. I looked around for my running shoes, a black pair I had brought with me from Pyongyang. But they were nowhere. On the floor beside me, where I thought I had placed my shoes the night before, was a pair of thin sneakers with the soles falling apart. I

scratched my head and scanned the train station. My eyes landed on a young *kotjebi* near one of the exits who was staring at me. When I caught his eye, he bowed to say thank you.

"Did you steal my shoes?" I called out, my voice echoing against the concrete walls. "Did you take mine and replace them with these?" I held up the tattered sneakers for him to see.

"In future, you should tie your shoes around your neck when you sleep!" he yelled back. He then left quickly, too quickly for my brothers and me to chase him down.

Angry, I threw one of the sneakers across the train station floor.

I was still filthy from traveling in the coal train. I was dirty from the fight the day before. My skin was covered in dried blood, bruises, and mud, and was scratched from the tiny stones on the ground on which I had been pinned. My head itched, likely from lice. And now all that I had to wear on my feet were old, broken sneakers.

Chulho and Young-bum each grabbed one of my arms and spun me around as Min-gook slipped his shoes onto my feet. "I'll go barefoot," he said. "I've always wanted to run a marathon barefoot," he added as I opened my mouth to protest taking his shoes.

"This is what I want you to do," Chulho explained as he came in close to me. "I'm going to leap into an open cargo hold as the train is starting to leave the station. I'll get in first to help you up, but you follow me and do the same."



Before I could ask any questions, Chulho took off, with all of us trailing him, me at the very back.

I huffed and snorted like a wounded wild boar.

My ribs hurt, and breathing was difficult. When Chulho rounded the caboose, I lost track of him for a moment. Then he came into view again. He was racing, running even faster than Min-gook, down the tracks on which a train was slowly moving out. Then suddenly he was flying through the air, leaping like a mountain tiger. He disappeared into the cargo hold.

Chulho reemerged to help Young-bum up next. Min-gook flew in, much like Chulho and without needing assistance. Myeongchul raced along the side, his hand outstretched waiting for someone to catch it. Finally, Chulho, with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, pulled him in. Sangchul and Unsik were each pulled up by Young-bum.

Soon it was just me left. I pushed my legs to move faster as the train started to speed up.

When I neared the open door, I lifted my arms into the air the way I did as a child when I wanted my mother and father to swing me high at the amusement park.

I don't know who grabbed my hand, but whoever it was, he was perspiring. I thought I was going to slip out from his grasp and fall under the moving train.

I felt myself being lifted and my legs leaving the ground.

I screamed as I felt the grip loosen.



But then I saw Young-bum. He held on tight to my lower arm and yanked me into the open cargo hold.

I fell clear across to the other side and landed against the metal wall with a thud.

WE GOT OFF ALMOST AT THE CENTER OF THE CITY AT Songpyeong train station.

We had barely set foot inside Songpyeong Market when we found ourselves cornered by another *kotjebi* gang. I was angry mostly because we hadn't even had time to get food, *sool*, or a pack of cigarettes. Chulho had smoked the last one on the train.

This time, I didn't even try to remain standing when their leader hurled his entire weight down on top of me. As his fists pounded my face, somehow I managed to indicate to him that he had won. As he got off me, he spat in my face and said: "Work under us or leave."

"We'll leave," I said as Young-bum pulled me up.

We hopped another train and got off at Sunam Market. I lost there, too, this time to a boy about half my size. Well, not really. It just seemed that way because he was short, not much taller than Myeongchul. But this guy had a surefire trick: He got me in a hold like a sumo wrestler, with one arm around my leg, the other around my shoulders, and he kicked so hard at my chest with his sharp, pointy knees that I nearly vomited. He also liked to bite. Besides bruises all over my body and too-many-to-count

head wounds, I had this scrawny guy's teeth marks on my arms and legs.

WE ARRIVED AT POHWANG MARKET STARVED AND ALL OF us wiggling out for cigarettes and alcohol. We waded into the sea of merchants, determined to steal food and buy some *sool* before meeting up with a *kotjebi* gang and my getting the senses knocked out of me.

But, man, what was it with Pohwang? It was as if the *kotjebi* could smell new blood.

As I reached for a twisted bread, the leader of the gang that ruled that section of the market, a tall wiry guy with a long neck, tapped me on the shoulder and flicked his head, indicating "Let's go." I groaned, grabbed the bread stick anyway, and tossed it to Young-bum. Someone should at least eat. I then motioned for the rest of my gang to follow.

The guy led me to an open field that was covered in broken glass. His crew soon formed around him. He stepped toward me and, speaking with a lisp, said: "The loser will leave."

As if I didn't know the rules already.

From my other fights, if you could call them that, I had learned a few things. First off, go in first and fast, grab hold of your opponent, and don't let go. Wrestle him to the ground. Now, since my training was tae kwon do, I had to be able to step back far enough to inflict my kicks and punches. My strategy, if I ever could imple-

ment it, was that when my opponent was on his knees or swerving, unlike the others, who just kept hanging on to me, I would let go, move back, and do my tae kwon do patterns.

"Go," one of his sidekicks said.

The tall skinny guy with the lisp lunged toward me fast. But this time it was as if I were watching in slow motion. As he moved, I shot my right leg up and out, my foot landing hard on his groin, forcing him to stumble backward, squealing in pain. I sprang toward him, kicking him hard in the stomach. He fell down on his knees, gasping for air. As I raised my fist to strike his back and face, he lifted a shaky right hand and called out for me to stop.

"You win," he said, wincing.

I stepped toward the boy and offered him my hand. "Leave or come under us," I said.

"We cannot leave here," he said, in between catching his breath. "We will stay and work for you."

THE BOY'S NAME WAS HYEKCHUL, AND HE AND HIS GANG were familiar with Pohwang Market, as they'd grown up nearby. He and his gang were a lot like us, with parents who had either died or left to find food and never came back. They were *pajang-jebi*, Hyekchul explained, whose *modus operandi* was to knock over a vendor's stand and then steal the items as the merchant scrambled to pick things up.

Hyekchul said that in his first fight with an opposing gang,

his upper lip had been cut with a knife so badly that he no longer could speak properly. "The other *kotjebi* make fun of us," he said, "because *pajang-jebi* is considered one of the lowest forms of stealing. Begging is worse," he explained. "But we come right after that."

"The other gangs say we're like ants on their sticky buns," one of Hyekchul's underlings joined in. "They call us weak. They say we shame them. But the truth is, none of us wants to fight. We're just kids wanting to eat—mostly wanting our parents to come home."

I got that, I told him. We were all pretty average kids, too, some of us with big dreams at one time. To be honest, I wasn't sure whether we still had them. Some unspoken rules about street living include never speaking about family or our hopes.

WE STAYED AT POHWANG MARKET FOR SEVERAL WEEKS, sleeping in an old warehouse alongside Hyekchul and his gang. It was dangerous in Pohwang, with the *Shangmoo* and police always looking for boys. Because of this, we took shifts, two of us awake at all times, acting as watchmen.

On the outskirts of the city, I found us all a second home, an old farm shed. It was cold in the shed. For when it was just too risky to sleep in the warehouse and we found ourselves in the shed on blistery winter nights, Chulho and Unsik came up with

the idea of making pants and sweaters out of vinyl sheeting that we'd wear like shells, to keep in our body warmth.

Death was all around us. We'd enter the market in the mornings to find women wailing and rocking in their arms children who had died during the night. As we plunged deep into the merchants' stalls, we found the corpses of old men and women, mouths still agape as if, in their final moments, they wanted to say something, their eyes staring out, pleading with us to hear them. I always thought the place after death was peaceful. It was how my *eomeoni* had described it. But what I saw on the faces of the dead was anything but. It was as if they had got stuck looking at and feeling all their grief and pain.

I started to smoke heavily in Pohwang, so much so that I'd awake with a wet cough and my chest feeling tight and on fire.

I bought raw opium from a merchant Chulho got to know. Back at our home base, my gang and I heated the latex from the opium pod on a spoon, mixed the syrup in water, and drank it. The concoction would settle my stomach when I ate a bug or rotten food—at least, that was my excuse. On those days when I did opium, I'd float through the markets, drifting in unknown places in my mind, many of which I can't recall now, but they sure felt like they were nice.

Chulho told me that there was another drug, called ice or *ping-du*, that he'd heard some *kotjebi* gangs used that took them



to heaven. This drug, he boasted, helped them forget their hunger. Ice made them confident and gave them more energy to steal and fight.

Chulho looked for it for us, but he couldn't find it.

I eventually chalked the mystery ice drug up to folklore, which Myeongchul explained was make-believe stories that helped people cope with difficult lives. "It's like if we believe the drug exists, then we'll keep going until we find it. In moments of despair, we'll pick ourselves up because we want to find this thing that people say takes us to heaven," he said one night right around my thirteenth birthday, a birthday I wanted to forget. I hadn't told the others, but that day I had sipped my opium drink from noon until nightfall. It was my way of celebrating, I guess.

"Uh-huh," I said, thinking instead of the *Learning Journey of a Thousand Miles*. "It's kind of a folk story, too?" I asked Myeongchul, who nodded. I was so high that, for a brief moment, I felt as if I were Kim Il-sung stuck up in those mountains.

"It's a folk story, a good one," he replied matter-of-factly. "Folklore has a funny way of becoming truth. If we didn't have folk stories, we might start to question our lives, our governments, our world . . . We might start . . . thinking for ourselves."

"Ah," I said, floating on the ship of opium. I don't think he noticed.

"Right now," he leaned in close and whispered conspiratorially, "we're in the middle of a river, with one bank being our old lives

filled with those folk stories that helped control us and which made us feel safe. The other bank, the one we are trying to swim toward, is the unknown."

"Ah," I said again, thinking to myself that I didn't mind the middle part of this journey so much as long as I had opium to calm the waters.

UNSIK, WITH HIS DISTINCTIVE WHISTLE, CLIMBED A TALL post in the market and perched himself at the top. His job was to whistle—"one long"—to let us know if the *Shangmoo* had caught our scent. Two short whistles meant the police were following us.

One day, as the azaleas were just starting to bloom, the *Shangmoo* not only hunted Min-gook and me down as we meandered through the stalls, two policemen joined in as well, forcing us to split up. We started heading toward the abandoned farm shed, but instead we ducked behind a building and let them pass. The *Shangmoo* and the police went right to our safe house. I stole through the back alleys to a large boulder about a block from the safe house, which we had all agreed would be our marker. I took three pebbles, just as my father had taught me when we played toy soldier in Pyongyang, and laid them at the foot of the boulder to tell my brothers and Hyekchul's band not to go to the shed. What was once a game had now become real. I had taught the others how to use small stones to communicate with one another. What I was saying on this day was that we'd been busted.

That night, Hyekchul's gang and mine split up. We let his gang take the shed.

My brothers and I headed to the forest.

IT WAS A NOISY NIGHT AND RAW, THE COLD GETTING RIGHT inside our bones so much that even the vinyl sheeting couldn't keep the chill at bay. We all stayed awake, shivering, huddled together, waiting for morning and the chance to slip back into the train station to get warm. We were all quiet, including, uncharacteristically, Myeongchul. We listened to the wind and the night noises.

"I think we should stop calling each other by our real names," Min-gook eventually said at dawn.

None of us had slept.

"If we have fake names and we're caught, the party can't track down our family members and hurt them," Myeongchul added.

"What should I be called?" I asked, thinking *Boy General* would be most fitting.

I could hear my brothers scratching their chins. Chulho and Unsik were starting to show man-stubble.

"Chang," Chulho eventually called out. *Chang* means "spear" in Korean.

"Why?" I exclaimed. "After all, you're more like a Chang. When I first met you, I thought you were the one who was piercing and sharp."

"It's only my mouth that stings," Chulho replied with a sinister laugh. "Inside, I am more like soft tofu."

We all chuckled at that.

"I think 'Chang' is a good name for you," Young-bum said. "You're quieter, for sure, than Chulho and Myeongchul, but when you speak, we trust your words because we know you've thought things through. I know you would die for me. You are direct and sharp like a spear."

"When you fought Hyekchul, you were focused, just like a spear whizzing through the air toward its target," Unsik added. "I saw that same look when you performed your tae kwon do patterns for the first time at the market. It's like something takes over."

"I wish something would take over for me in every fight," I muttered.

I ran the word *Chang* over my tongue. I liked it. "From this day on," I finally announced, "I shall be known as Chang."



**T**he morning that I came to be called Chang, my gang and I discussed moving on because the *Shangmoo* had discovered our hideaway. While we didn't say it to ourselves or to one another, I think we all secretly wished that we'd go back to Gyeong-seong and find our parents home.

"A plan is a plan, and we vowed that we would head north and work our way back to Gyeong-seong," Myeongchul said, waving his fingers in the air as if he were drawing a map. "We're here," he said, pointing. "Let's start making our way back to there."

Hyekchul and his gang weren't ready to leave the area where most of them grew up. Some fortune-tellers had told them tales that the famine had ended. Hyekchul and his posse had paid them a small fortune of their hard-stolen won to do spells to bring their families back together. Hyekchul and his boys still had hope, lots of it, that soon they'd see their mothers and fathers. The fortune-



tellers promised them. I was now a full-blown skeptic. But I didn't want to take their hope away from them by making them move with us, so I released their gang.

"You're free to go," I said on the rainy day when we said good-bye. As I spoke, lightning flashed over the southern hills. "I hope we've taught you well so the next gang you meet you'll beat and they'll fight under you, not you under them."

Hyekchul nodded and gave me a long hug, showing affection I wasn't used to from a friend. When he finally pulled away, his eyes were bursting with water like the spring rivers. "I'm scared being without you," he said.

I rubbed his back and told him that it would be okay, that he and his group had skills now and would make it to the other side of the riverbank, the unknown side, where his family was waiting for him. He thought that I was speaking about the Duman River and that his parents were on the other side, in China.

My gang and I hopped the freight train to Rajin-Seonbong, which was an economic zone, Chulho explained, in which Chinese, Russian, and Joseon merchants all sold goods. "We can get things in Rajin-Seonbong that we can't get anywhere else, like fur hats, chocolate made with milk and mint, and this alcohol called vodka that goes down your throat smooth like cream."

Not like *sool*, which always, no matter how much I drank, burned its way through me.

"Maybe in Rajin-Seonbong we can get jobs on a ship," Myeong-

chul said, his voice wistful and dreamy. "Maybe we can put our lives as *kotjebi* behind us."

I let my mind wander to thoughts of a life sailing the seas.

"I'll wake to the sound of gulls," Myeongchul continued, as if describing my daydream, "and I'll eat mackerel for breakfast and lunch."

The way Myeongchul talked, I could see us all there on some big fishing ship, our faces sun-kissed and our hands calloused from pulling up the fishing nets and separating the crabs from the fish.

"Stop," I eventually said, more to myself than to him. "I don't want to think of such things. Even if we landed jobs, we'd still be *kotjebi*, because in Joseon no one is allowed to work until they're eighteen. We'd be slave laborers. The captain could pay us nothing and starve us to death."

Myeongchul looked at Chulho, who shook his head and pursed his lips before saying, "Sometimes it's nice to daydream. You really can be sour sometimes."

"Really?" I said, glaring at him. "I'd say your nickname is 'Dream Wrecker,' because since I first arrived in Gyeong-seong, that's all you've ever done—get me to look at the facts rather than believe in something better."

Myeongchul sighed. "I don't want to fight. Not now. At least it was a nice dream," he whispered, blushing and lowering his head.

"Dreams are beautiful," I said to him in a soft voice, trying to be more upbeat. "Keep it, because you never know."

"Dreams are one thing the government can't take from us," he replied, looking up.

"Yeah, but they sure try," Chulho complained.

I rolled my eyes at him and pounded my fist into the palm of my hand, indicating "Enough."

MY BROTHERS AND I DECIDED ON THE TRAIN TO RAJIN-Seonbong that we would not wait to be cornered by any *kotjebi* gang. We would search them out and jump them first.

Rajin-Seonbong Market was beside the harbor. A large freight ship, with crates piled high with what Chulho said were English markings, was moored there. I stopped to stare, for the ship was heavily guarded by military. Workers were moving the crates off on trolleys and loading them into a large and heavily guarded truck.

"I bet that's all going to Pyongyang," Young-bum said in a hushed voice, coming up behind me.

A shiver ran through me because I knew he was right.

I led my gang into the market, which was much like all the others: stalls upon stalls, manned mostly by disheveled men, who I suspected had had big government jobs until all went to rot up here, and a few of their wives; people hawking wilting produce, likely taken out of underground freezers where it had been stored

since harvest season; and a few professional vendors, who were better dressed and more filled out. What was different was that there were cars driven by Russian and Chinese businessmen, large cars that would push themselves through the crowds of people. None of my brothers except Chulho had ever seen a white person before, so we stopped to stare at the Russian drivers. Both the drivers' and my brothers' expressions were a mix of awe and fear. I slapped Unsik and Young-bum on the back to get them out of their daydream and told them we had business, too, or else we'd starve. "Let's go and get breakfast."

In Rajin-Seonbong Market there was white rice, tofu, seaweed, and fresh fish, some of which was dried and hanging off clothes-pegs on lines stretched behind the vendors. I was looking at these fish, some skinned pink, others fully whole and blue, when suddenly something made me look up. I stopped dead in my tracks.

I snapped my fingers twice, indicating to my gang, who were behind me, to do the same.

I then pointed at this jumpy kid wearing gray slacks with holes in them and a dirty gray jacket. He was skittish as he looked around, not yet noticing me, reminding me of a field weasel. He sniffed the market, looking for something. But what caught my attention was the way the merchants looked at him: as if they were afraid. It could have been my imagination, but I felt the merchants were backing away to give him space to steal whatever he liked.

"I'm sure this boy is part of the gang ruling the market," I whispered to Unsik, who was now standing beside me.

"Or its leader," he shot back. "I don't like the look of him. Shifty. Ruthless, like he'd pull a chain or, worse, a knife."

*Easy fight*, I thought. "He's thin," I replied. "He's on some drug and lost in some mist of whatever it is that's making his skin yellow and his nerves twitch like sardines frying in soybean oil. Look more closely."

"Hey, you," I called out to the guy in a confident, strong voice. I wanted him to get the message right at the get-go that my gang and I had arrived and were taking over. "Where's your leader?" I shouted, taking a few steps toward him.

He stopped, turned to look at me, squinted his eyes, and puckered up his lips. "Who are you?" he asked in a voice that made me take a step back. It was like a gale, like the voice of the man who had taken over my house back in Gyeong-seong and eventually threw me out the front door.

"This guy has no fear," I whispered out loud. "Chang," I replied. "I lead this gang. Who's the leader in charge of the gang who rules this market?"

"We don't have leaders here," said the boy, who I guessed was about sixteen. His voice was cold and empty, like a week-old corpse. "The alley, in one hour. Be there," he continued, pointing to some buildings on the far side of the market. He took a few steps toward me, then stopped. He was close enough now that I



could see his face. He had a crooked mouth and wide, high cheekbones, pockmarked from some skin disease. He opened his mouth and grinned. His gums were black, and his teeth were yellow, like his skin. The whites of his eyes were yellow, too, and his enlarged pupils moved over us like spotlights, back and forth. Whatever he was on was not opium. Whatever this guy was on made him smell sweet and brought him back to life. I shuddered, thinking that the drug that takes a person to heaven might actually exist after all. And if it did, this boy was on it.

"We call over there the 'cemetery,'" he continued. "Today it will be your funeral."

I wanted to know who "we" were, but before I could get the question out, the boy had spun around and swiped some electronic wire from the merchant who had been standing around listening to us talk.

The merchant didn't even flinch. It was as if he were used to it. It was as if he knew it was better to let this guy take what he wanted than stand up to him.

AS WE MADE OUR WAY THROUGH THE MARKET TOWARD THE alley, I bent down and grabbed handfuls of stones from the ground, which I then wrapped inside T-shirts I swiped off tables and tied as bags to be used as weapons. Chulho picked up a wrench. Young-bum and Unsik knicked wooden poles. It was like we knew this fight would be different.

The alley was cloaked in the shadow of the abandoned buildings that stood on both sides of it. And the way the alley was positioned between these buildings, I could no longer hear the sounds of the market. Instead, there was a wind, as if we were in some kind of tunnel—a wind that seemed to swallow us up. I felt like I was inside a coffin.

I heard a scratching sound and jumped. My heart raced. “It’s just rats,” Chulho said, putting a warm hand on my shoulder.

Then there was the flapping of wings. I jumped again.

A raven was taking off, with a long piece of raw flesh dangling from its talons.

We turned a corner, and there they were, six of them, all of them like the boy from the market: wild-eyed and jittery, but not like Young-bum at school. These boys were like the alley, like Joseon . . . *hollow and haunted*. The holes inside them had grown so big that only cobwebs, shards of glass, and yu-ryeong roamed around within. These boys may have once had families, had dreams, felt love, had hope, but now the bricks and mortar that held them together were whatever drug they were on. That much I could read off them.

“Who is your leader?” I called out, mustering up the strongest, most authoritative voice I could find. It was hard. Every muscle in my body was twitching to turn around and run away.

“What?” several boys said at once, looking at one another and then at us.

"I told you, we don't have leaders," the boy I had met at the market spat out.

"We fight together," another said.

My hands grew clammy and my heart started to race. I didn't know what to do or say. I was the only one of my brothers prepared physically and emotionally to fight. My brothers were soft, especially facing a gang with no fear.

I opened my mouth, wanting to make a deal with them to let me fight their strongest and in return we would leave Rajin-Seonbong. But I didn't have the chance. They came at us, waving metal pipes and broken bottles.

Everything became a blur as arms flailed toward and around me. My mind couldn't keep up with my body, so I just stopped thinking and, as my tae kwon do master had taught me, let technique take over. I watched myself, as if seated in an audience high above, dodge weapons being thrust at various parts of my body. I heard that *thump* of a fist pounding on flesh, and I started kicking anything in front of me with a ferociousness I didn't even know was inside me.

Then I saw blood . . . *blood* pouring from my brothers' faces and onto their shirts, so I attacked even harder anyone who was in front of me, in front of my brothers. I started swinging my T-shirts of stones, hearing them crunch against bone. Much later, my brothers would tell me I was like a superhuman, a real-life Boy

General. "You could have conquered Japan on your own," Chulho would say one day with a laugh.

But that conversation would take place much later.

Slowly, one opposing gang member after another retreated until, finally, I was staring into the wild yellow eyes of the boy I had met at the market. He put up his hand to indicate I had won. But I wasn't about to give him any concessions. I went at him, kicking him in the stomach, then the groin, and finally the head, until he stumbled backward, hit his head hard against a concrete wall, and slumped to the ground. I then spat in his face.

"Don't ever come back here," I said as he moaned and fell unconscious. I didn't kill him, that much I knew. But I wanted to.

I bent over, hands on my knees, to catch my breath. All the while, my eyes were closed and my mind was thanking whatever force had allowed us to beat this group of seriously nasty boys. Then something startled me, and I looked up.

It wasn't a noise. It was silence, like the wind being sucked back up, as if I were standing in the eye of a hurricane, as if I were inside that coffin again.

Hair stood up on the back of my neck as if the *yu-ryeong* had found me this time. I turned around.

Chulho, Sangchul, Min-gook, Young-bum, and Unsik were huddled around Myeongchul, who was lying on the ground.

*We already know the things that will happen to us in life. We spend*

*our days just waiting for them to be revealed. I heard my grandfather's words as I walked toward them.*

Myeongchul had a huge gash on the side of his head. His entire face was plastered in blood.

"He's d-d-dead?" I sputtered as I collapsed onto my knees.

MY BROTHERS AND I FOUND LONG PLANKS OF WOOD THAT we tied together with strips of our clothes to make a stretcher. We then lifted the moaning Myeongchul onto it and carried him along the dirt road toward the countryside.

On the outskirts of the city, beside a field overgrown with weeds, Chulho spied a farmer's shed that, from a distance, looked abandoned.

Inside, we covered Myeongchul's trembling body with the clothes we were wearing.

"I'm cold and hungry," he managed to choke out. I had to put my ear up close to his mouth to hear him. I felt his forehead. He was clammy and cool. Unsik lit the pine tree stick dipped in resin that he carried with him in a plastic bag around his neck. Once the shed was lit, I could see that Myeongchul was pale, nearly white, like the underbelly of a swan.

Young-bum pulled from his bag a stale twisted bread stick, which he started to break into pieces for Myeongchul to suck on.

Myeongchul, however, reached up and waved for Young-bum to stop.



"Don't forget our first rule. We have to share," he whispered into my ear. He then smiled, his teeth white against lips that were turning blue. With shaky hands, he broke the bread stick into seven pieces.

Myeongchul drank some water that Chulho had collected from a nearby stream and then told a few proverbs, his voice becoming stronger as the night wore on, which made me relax a bit, thinking he would be all right once he ate and rested.

I cleaned his wounds, the way my brothers had cleaned mine after I had lost my fights. Then, as Myeongchul's eyes fluttered back and forth into sleep, Sangchul sang the lullaby my mother sang to me as a child.

*"Hushabye, hushabye baby  
sleep well  
go to a country of dream  
my lovely baby  
go to a country of dream  
my lovely baby."*

We eventually left Myeongchul alone to sleep while we stood outside and smoked.

As we took long drags on our cigarettes, we talked in hushed voices about how we had won a battle against probably the worst foes we would ever face. Chulho agreed that this gang was likely

on the drug that took people to heaven. "*Ping-du*," he told us. "See, that drug is not a folk story!"

"We should stay in Rajin-Seonbong for a while," I said, changing the subject. "I got a feeling those merchants wanted those boys out of there. They might be nice to us."

"Maybe Myeongchul is right, and we might even find real work on the ships here," said Min-gook.

Chulho laughed. "There is no work for kids," he said. "Such is the life of us kings of the nation."

Since chatterbox Myeongchul wasn't there to say anything, we soon fell silent. After we finished two packs of cigarettes among us, we crept back into the shed and fell asleep on some hay.

I dreamed again of Pyongyang that night and of Mangyeongdae Yuheejang, of *abeoji* and *eomeoni* swinging me high into the air. I saw the hill near the Daedong River where I went tobogganing in the winter.

In my dream, though, I started to cry, for in the middle of it, I knew . . . *I knew* . . . I was dreaming. "I'm a street boy," I told myself. Then I heard Myeongchul's voice digging its way toward me.

"A nobody, a lost boy, a dead boy," he said, his voice faint, as if he were very far away.

I saw myself back in Gyeong-seong Market, late at night, the men drunk, taking swipes at me with their rusty chains, their stench hitting me long before they ever could. Then I saw, in my

dream, a dead old man left to rot in the snow, holding his hat in one hand, a small toy soldier in the other.

I heard Myeongchul again. "If you keep your mind, you will survive in a tiger's den," he said.

I went somewhere dark after that, where my dreams and Myeongchul's voice no longer reached.

IN THE MORNING, ALL OF US AWOKE MORE OR LESS AT THE same time, chilled and soaked in dew, for someone had left the door open. We patted ourselves dry with Chulho's extra shirt as we hopped from one foot to the other to warm up. Then we looked out the front door at our surroundings of barren fields. In the distance was a low mountain. We weren't far from Baekdu Mountain, Young-bum said, where Kim Jong-il was born. "My father told me once that there is a lake in Baekdu Mountain made from when a meteor hit the earth. A crater that had fallen from the stars, as if to say Joseon was the chosen place."

I wanted to share with Young-bum my mother's Myth of Dangun, but I remembered Myeongchul and wanted to wake him first.

I shook him gently. "Wake up, Myeongchul."

I then shook him harder.

He was stiff and cold like the ground outside.

He had died sometime in the night.

**F**or the longest time my brothers and I huddled around Myeongchul's body.

Myeongchul, I thought to myself, was our voice. I felt, looking at his corpse, that my throat had been torn from me.

We were all so far away in our own thoughts that we jumped when the door to the shed flew open and a tall figure blocked the light.

"What are you doing here?" a deep, commanding voice demanded. Police. *Shangmoo*. I leaped to my feet and held my hands up over my head.

"I s-s-surrender," I said, my voice trembling. "I mean you no harm, but . . ." My throat hurt too much to talk because, while I couldn't cry, I sure wanted to. I pointed to Myeongchul.

The man stepped into the shed to get a better look. As he did

so, I could see him clearly. He wasn't wearing a navy-blue police uniform. I didn't smell that smell—you know, *police*.

Instead, he was wearing the outfit of the Worker Peasant Red Guards, a dirty and tattered khaki Mao-collared jacket and matching pants. He smelled of earth and dew. He worked the farms.

At first, his face was taut. I sensed he was more afraid of us than we of him. But as he bent over Myeongchul, his face softened.

"Where are you from?" he asked no one in particular.

"Gyeong-seong," Sangchul whispered, tears dripping down his cheeks. He wiped them away with the back of his hand, smearing dirt across his face.

The man reached over and shut Myeongchul's open eyelids. He then cleared his throat. "At the mountain," he said, pointing across the field. "I will show you where. You can have a funeral."

THE MAN ALLOWED US TO USE HIS PULL-CART TO WHEEL Myeongchul's body. We walked for about an hour, following the man through the muddy fields, until we reached the foot of the mountain. Then my brothers and I hoisted Myeongchul onto our shoulders and carried him up. We wanted to bury him high so that his grave wouldn't be disturbed by dogs sniffing around for some flesh and bones to eat or by other people looking for a spot to bury their loved ones.



That morning, when I had looked at the mountain, it seemed harmless, like a hiccup in the fields. As we ascended it, though, we had to navigate around sharp crags and dead trees jutting out from the rock face, the roots of which twisted around and hung on to the ledges as an old woman's knotted fingers do her cane.

We stopped at a wide ledge and spread out, looking for a shallow pit in which to bury Myeongchul.

Unsik found an indentation in the ground, deep enough to be used as the burial place, and we laid Myeongchul's body in it.

On top of Myeongchul, we laid pine tree boughs.

Young-bum and Unsik both began to cry, big sobs that made them curl over at the waist. I found myself growing jealous of their tears because I wanted to wail, too.

We all bowed three times.

Instead of leaving right after, though, we stood and stared at the grave.

"You really aren't more handsome than me," Unsik finally said. "I just wanted you to know."

"You really could have been the best actor in the country," Sangchul said next.

Chulho nudged my shoulder. "Say something," he whispered.

I rocked back and forth from my heels to my toes and looked up at the sky. "To live on the streets means we have nothing left," I finally said, then stopped. So many thoughts were moving fast inside my mind, I couldn't catch just one.

"Our families—our pasts—feel like they never existed," I began again. "We're little more than animals now. At least that's what the merchants say about us, and the other *kotjebi*, too. The government once called us the kings and queens of the nation . . . Everyone has abandoned us. Everything has been taken away from us, except hope. You taught me that we can only give hope away. No one can take it. And you also taught me that hope is what makes us human. That, and love. It's time to let you go," I ended. "Leave here. Go find your parents and go to a better place, where you can act all the time and become the next Gil-nam Lee."

BACK AT THE SHED, THE FARMER GAVE US SOME RADISH and rice to eat. Then, dragging our feet, we headed back to the train station, as if we were the losers and not the victors of this city.

I didn't care where we went. Neither did the others. We had grumbled that we would take the first train, and wherever that took us was where we would go. Even though we had won the territory in Rajin-Seonbong, none of us wanted to remain there anymore. There were just too many *yu-ryeong*.